"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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Is There a Relation Between the Quality of People and the Quality of the Land on Which They Live?**

By Ralph W. Gwinn*

Notwithstanding all our wishes to the contrary, the quality of a human society, like the quality of a herd of cows, a stock of horses or a field of wheat, depends upon the manner in which that society is bred. If it is bred from the "tops," the quality improves. If it is bred from the bottoms, the quality declines. If the tops take to the land, where rearing children is congenial, the society improves. If the tops flock to and remain in the cities, where conditions are hostile to children, the society declines.

The characteristic aimed for in breeding cows is milk-giving. Those of horses, speed and high spirits or strength. In wheat we want the combined capacity to yield in abundance, to bear plump grains, to resist rust and withstand drought.

In the case of human stocks, the characteristics aimed for in breeding are those associated with the tendency toward capacity for the high practices of civilized living. A human society which breeds at its highest rate from the specimens that tend to be strongest in respect to these characteristics will improve in the quality of its civilization. That quality in people fixes quite generally the quality of the land on which they live. The chemical content of the land may be low. With intelligence, that can be improved. Poor land may be offset by desirable architecture of the homes, church and school, by the investment of several generations of loving care in the woods, the orchards and gardens. The climate and scenery and quality of people already there all determine the quality of the people who will make their homes in a given community. Our best life as measured in terms of the forms of cultivated living is still to be found in the rural and village sections of New England and Virginia, where the land is comparatively poor. And the worst forms of civilized living we find in the Mississippi Delta. In India we find the worst in the rich valley of the Ganges. So we shall not improve society by waiting for the day when our economic set-up is perfect or when all farmers are moved to rich land.

If more good farmers and fewer tenants had remained on the land, even the poor land, we would not now have a national scandal in wastage of our soil. George Washington had erosion problems on comparatively poor land in his time. He stopped it. Beginning in 1783 he stopped growing tobacco

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for fifteen years and sowed clover instead. He made money on his farm when he attended to it. From the day he left his farm to tenants when he became President until his return nine years later, his farm lost money. He got not a penny from it during that time. And so it is today and must be for all time. When we have farmer-owned and operated homesteads and intelligent people working their farms with their own hands, we have a good society. When farms fall into hands of tenants we have already an impoverished society and an impoverished land. When you go back home to visit along the old gravel pike where most of us were born, how often do you hear it said: "Most of the best people have moved away." Can't you see for yourselves? The old house of correct architecture and good furniture is falling in. The pines and cedars by the door have not been replanted in fifty years. The gardens and orchards are despoiled, the gates open, fences down. After that we need not look at the soil itself; we know the condition without looking.

Of course, it goes without saying that the better the soil the better should be the civilization it supports. The Mormons of Utah have demonstrated that. Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, is an old illustration. When you drive out of the valleys of Pennsylvania and approach the unproductive hillside, you are conscious often of two very different kinds of life in the same town and county. In the rich valleys you find the better architecture, the better upkeep, signs of pride and community spirit, better school houses, better churches, better payment of taxes. When the road leaves the good land and you begin to climb up the hills, there the houses begin to tumble down, the schools are poorly maintained, the soil is washing away. It simply means that where a civilization neglects its rural life, generally speaking, the poorer land will show the effects first, but the same character of neglect will ultimately show up in substantially the same way in the areas of good land as well. It is showing up. We merely deceive ourselves if we think that the blight is cast only upon the sandy slopes of the Southeast, or the occasional backward counties of the mountain country. The evil is attacking the very homesteads where many of us were born in some of the best sections of the rich lands of the Central West.

We are neglecting the seed-bed of the American race. The neglect is mostly spiritual and biological. We could maintain our spiritual life even on the poor economic returns now available in the country, but our materialistic civilization is not satisfied with such returns. We do not put the good life first and make the sacrifices necessary to maintain it. We have been taught both by the church and the school to make good, to seek jobs and to put jobs first in our lives, and seek the good life when we have demonstrated our capacity in the world of jobs.

The grave danger which has been threatening the American society for two generations lies in the tendency of genetically superior specimens in great numbers to migrate or settle in densely populated areas of a low birth-rate, while the tendency of genetically inferior specimens is to remain on the farms where it is much higher. It would seem clear that the mental qualities of the elements in the population which reproduce at the greatest rate will eventually prevail in the society. And they are reflected in the quality of the soil.

Take as an example a segment of the American population automatically selected to have the advantage of an education at Princeton. A college class at a place like Princeton would presumably represent on the average one of our genetically better groups. The entrance examinations are designed to reflect

high intellectual capacity, and care is taken to admit only persons of high character. It takes a person of better than average energy and ambition, combined with belief in his personal worth, to enter and graduate.

Twenty-five years after graduation it appears that there are 280 living members. The city dwellers have 1.16 children to the family. Those who dwell in towns and villages have 1.92. Fifteen were living on farms. Only thirty-three of the class had four or more children. Only 11.8 per cent of the class contributed to the normal population growth.

In four generations (say 110 years) there will be left only 39 persons, living descendants of this class of 280 graduates of Princeton. Take at random 280 families coming to adulthood who were living on farms the year the class graduated. If the present birth-rates continue as they have in the past, then in four generations (110 years) there will be 980 living persons, descendants of these farmers. The population would then be 39 descendants of college men to 980 descendants of farmers. A typical midwestern college until recently drawing more than 50 per cent of its students from the farm has since 1910 sent back only 10 per cent of her graduates to be farmers. Our human "tops" go to the cities, and there prove beyond a shadow of doubt that they are tops. But that ends their contribution to society, if we take the biological view. These tops tend to return or retire to the farm but only, in the vast majority of cases, after the reproduction period is over and they are racially dead.

Therefore, with no sufficient infusion of new blood and a continued one-way out-migration, we should expect to find what we do find, and that is a blight being cast over the people and their soil in many areas of our country. The two things go together.

We find that the American forms of civilized living once so proudly maintained in many areas are gone. Cultivated living goes, of course, when cultivated people do not teach the young their ways.

In so far as we have been despising and discouraging the way of life on the American farm, we have been forbidding young people of high genetic quality, who have their way to make in our society, to elect the farm way of life. Thus we have been impoverishing our society as a whole. We have directed youth's attention one way, cityward: 85 to 90 per cent of our college product. That is not a fair proportion under any scheme for a sound national life. We have promised greater economic security for them in the cities. Instead we have reaped for them sterility and they have found a life devoted to economics dull.

The country parish, with its minister as chief, is a form of human organization of peculiar merit. The objective of the organization is the pursuit of the good life by all the members of the parish, not merely by those who are hired to do good. Where the minister continues to be a sufficiently great personality to lead in pursuit of the good life by the persuasion of his speech, his mind and his example, this form of organization does not die out of a civilization.

The church in our cities has for the moment little prospect of regaining the place it, for such a long time, held in the way of life of our civilization. For one thing, a typical city community is composed largely of persons whose work and life have narrowed their deep interest to one activity.

When engaged outside this one activity, they crave distraction. For another thing, the church cannot remain in character and scream loud enough to get the tired, fagged attention of the city dweller.

But our rural communities gape with need in the place that the church organization once filled. It is quite likely that some of the great personalities belonging to the ministry will discover this situation before very long. Instead of treating a country parish as a stepping stone to the cherished city parish, they will invest their lives to restore the church to its old position in the country. Let us rebuild the temple and restore our soil. Those two efforts succeed or fail together.

For the first two hundred and fifty years in America, farming was primarily a way of life. The people were grimly determined first to practice civilized living, and farming was their way of life. The church was the very center of culture. The farm was the family home of nearly everybody until about 1860. Whittier was a farmer all his life and so was Emerson. They lived on their farms and worked them for their livings.

Education in those days was in no sense a preparation for city life and work. It was primarily a preparation for civilized living. Extensive schooling had nothing to do with earning power. Civilized living was the first objective of the families that established the pattern; making a living came after it. The boys might go for attendance at one of the great universities of Europe, and return to make their homes and their livings on farms. When the country church and family began to weaken, our calamities multiplied and quadrupled in the cities. We violated the teachings of Washington and Jefferson and are now threatened by masses of landless people.

In conclusion, there is no sound relation between people and the land except through the farm homestead. That is a farm home that is owner-operated. It has continuity of ownership and family pride and tradition running all through its history. Succeeding generations pay their debts to those gone before by improving and enriching the soil for those to come. It is or has been started by a family of highest cultural ambitions. It passes down from generation to generation in the same family line. Some time after the children have all reached adulthood, there might be a solemn family conference in which would be determined, on the basis of merit, the son or daughter who shall have the high privilege of buying or succeeding to the homestead, making it his home and operating the farm. It is no longer property in the ordinary sense. It is something more. It seldom enters the realm of barter and trade. It is not for sale.

This home should be tax-free. It must be saved from our devastating inheritance laws. Its acres are devoted to a social use, the highest social use to which any property can be put. They are devoted to the breeding and fostering of superior children, without which no civilization can long endure.

From such stocks of people the land takes on a quality like that of its owners. On them depend the vitality and continuity of the philosophy that puts in actual practice at the beginning, not the end, of adult life the cultivated, the civilized life, and passing on its principles and forms to their young is their first objective. The job itself, the business or skill they employ comes next and is incidental to the first. This conception of life can be maintained nowhere even in modern America so well as on the farm.

(This material is from Fifth Avenue To Farm by Fritts and Gwinn, being published by Harper and Brothers, 1938.)